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ARTICLE

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International students' perspective on developing employability during study abroad

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Abstract

In the last three decades, the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in employability skill development has been emphasised in UK national policy. Within the same time frame, internationalisation has emerged as a key strategy in higher education (HE), nationally and globally. However, the connection between the internationalisation of higher education and developing graduate employability is an understudied area of research. This paper addresses an identified gap in extant literature by examining the intersection of internationalisation, employability and the international student experience. The paper focuses on non-EU international students' perspectives which is neglected in dominant discourses on employability. Thematic analysis of data collected from 36 semi-structured interviews with students from 11 non-EU countries reveals the importance international students place on employability development opportunities during their study abroad. The findings highlight how international student agency is enabled or constrained within the affordances of international HE, and the implications for employability policy development in an increasingly internationalised context of the delivery of higher education. In conclusion, the implication of the findings is considered in view of the constraints on mobility brought on by COVID-19.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Considering that employability is cited by international students as the main motivation for studying abroad (Gribble et al., 2015; Soares & Mosquera, 2020), it is surprising that there is a paucity of research into international students' perceptions on developing their employability. Two main reasons account for this deficit: (1) as has been widely acknowledged, national and institutional strategies and policies on international student recruitment are driven by economic rationales (de Wit, 2020; Humfrey, 2011); and (2) employability is a priority for national policy-making within country contexts (Purcell & Elias, 2004; Römogens et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2004; Teichler, 1999; Yorke, 2004) which excludes international students. This phenomenon reasserts international students' 'outsider status' in a nation-bound world (Marginson, 2012). The outcome is international students' exclusion in employability plans and policy yet to be addressed. This gap is critical considering growing international students' numbers up to 5 million globally according to OECD, 2018 figures. From a research perspective, scholars such as Findlay (2011) argue that 'as a group of mobile people, international students have been under-studied' (p. 162). Also student perspectives largely remain missing in studies of employability (Tymon, 2013). In particular, there remains a lack of attention to international students' perspectives on employability (Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020; Huang et al., 2014; Li, 2017), despite their well-discussed [economic] contribution to the internationalisation efforts of nations and institutions.

Analysis of international graduate employment practices at Australian and international institutions led Gribble et al. (2015) to identify the need to develop frameworks to support the employability of international students in host countries. Additional reviews of employability literature show the need for more evidence to support claims that study abroad programmes enhance labour market prospects and employability (Di Pietro, 2019). Moreover, understanding the perceptions on developing employability is emerging as a relevant, though less explored area of research (Soares & Mosquera, 2020). Drawing on the findings of a UK qualitative study, this paper addresses these three areas of identified gap in the literature.

To set the context, I briefly revisit the dominant conceptualisation of employability from a competence-based approach premised upon individual ability. Next a critical examination of previous studies that focus on student employability highlights existing gaps in the literature. Drawing on the findings from my research, I frame international students' agency in relation to their *reflection, action and consultation* towards developing employability. The paper concludes with suggestions for higher education institutions (HEIs) to consider what Harvey (2001) describes as an 'employability audit' to assess the processes in place with regards to embedding employability development opportunities (EDOs) for international students. While an employability audit benefits student in general, particular attention is paid to international students as they have non-citizen status in host countries. This status positions international students in a policy void within a system of nationally oriented employability policy that ignores institutional initiatives to recruit international students.

1.1 | Conceptual framing of employability

There is no one definition of employability. The skills approach, however, is the dominant way that employability is constructed in national policy-making, institutional discourses and at the individual level. Examining the employability literature in higher education and workplace learning, Römogens et al. (2020) conclude that all employability definitions can be narrowed down to a competence-based approach that focuses on an individual's skills and ability to obtain and maintain employment throughout their career. The skills perspective is an offshoot of Schultz's (1961) human capital theory that connects education to a higher propensity for career advancement and obtaining jobs. This approach sees employment outcomes as a quantitative measurement of employability. However, many scholars argue that the skills approach does not adequately take into account other factors not

related to individual skills and abilities that may impact employability, such as, the state of the economy and competitiveness of the job market (Brown et al., 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). The underlying assumption of the rationality of actors (employers) involved in the recruiting process is also questioned (Harvey, 2001; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017).

Furthermore, the skills approach is criticised by many who argue that it is a crude measure that assumes a simplistic linear relationship between education and employment (Bridgstock, 2017; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). This view also construes employability as an institutional achievement based on the employment rates of graduates in league tables (Harvey, 2001). The study by Sin and Amaral (2016) is pertinent in this regard. They questioned who is responsible for developing employability. Their survey explored the views of 684 Portuguese academics and 64 employers. They found that the academics and employers in their study attribute high responsibility for developing employability to higher education. As will be discussed later, however, it is less apparent how institutional responsibility towards developing graduate employability is conceptualised and embedded in practice. It is important to point out the wider debate, discussed elsewhere, about the purpose of a university amidst normative value-added discourses, labour market outcomes, research, teaching and service (Agasisti et al., 2011; Collini, 2012; McCowan, 2015).

The focus in this paper is particularly relevant to the skills approach in that it places the responsibility for developing employability on individuals. The individualisation of employability has implications for HEIs and students: the former seen as service providers to the latter who increasingly have to pay for the costs of education (Sin & Amaral, 2016). Sin and Amaral's (2016) work offers an example of the increasing number of studies focusing on the perspectives of employers and academics in relation to employability. Yet, there is scant attention to student perspectives about developing employability. The next section highlights the dearth of empirical interrogation of students' perspectives on developing employability, in general. It crucially notes the dearth of international students' perspectives, even in the limited number of studies seeking to address this gap in the literature. Noting the importance accorded to agency in recent scholarly work on international students (Matthews, 2018; Tran & Vu, 2018), it further makes a critical observation in relation to the main study that examined international students' employability in the UK.

1.2 | Previous studies on student employability

Tymon (2013) gives a useful analysis on students as the 'intended recipients of employability skills development' (p. 849) whose perspective is missing in the employability discourse.

Because these students are the intended recipients of employability skills development, their views are important. Most textbooks on learning theory highlight the need for learner motivation and engagement with the process to ensure effectiveness...Yet, we know little about the extent to which employability matters to current students, and what employability is from their perspective. Do they have similar views to other stakeholders on what transferable skills, or attributes, might be necessary? Do they think employability can, and should, be learned?

The students in Tymon's study were undergraduate students in the first, second and final year of a Business degree at a UK university. There is less likelihood that the sample includes non-EU international students, considering that similar studies focus explicitly on home students in line with the prevailing national-oriented employability policy discourse (Higher Education Commission, 2012; Tomlinson, 2008). However, Woodley and Brennan (2000), caution that the focus of employability studies on 'young, first-degree full-time students who are domiciled in the UK...will be less and less representative of the whole body of students' and would be ignoring the aspects of internationalisation (p. 248). Reflecting on the last decade of trends, the latest HESA (2020) data shows that almost half (48%) of full-time

PGT students in the United Kingdom are from non-EU countries. The little attention paid to international student employability means that policy discourse and research does not reflect the changing demographics and diversity of students in UK HE, especially at postgraduate level.

The main empirical study on employability involving non-EU international students in the United Kingdom was conducted by Rong Huang and co-researchers, first reported in their 2014 paper. The research, supported by their university, used a survey to explore 449 Mainland Chinese students' perspectives of employability during their study in the United Kingdom (Huang et al., 2014). The research focus on Chinese students reflects their position as the largest group of mobile international students. Since 2012/13, the population of Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom exceeded the total number of all EU students combined (HESA, 2020). In 2018/19 students from China represented 35% of all non-EU students studying in the United Kingdom ($n = 120,385$). This is a 34% increase in the 5-year span from 2014/2015 ($n = 89,540$). The research by Huang et al. (2014) thus addresses a key gap in the literature on UK graduate employability. They concluded that the opportunity to improve career prospects in China was the main reason for studying abroad (Huang & Turner, 2018). This finding is congruent with the literature. However, as several scholars have argued, there is a need to move beyond normative discourses around employability that predominantly focus on an outcomes approach. Furthermore, the tenuous link between study abroad and employability continues to attract attention and debate (De Pietro, 2019). The second key finding in Huang and Turner's (2018) research relates to international student perceptions of employability. This will be discussed after a quick consideration of a recent study by Soares and Mosquera (2020) that highlighted the importance of this second finding.

Soares and Mosquera (2020) emphasise the importance of examining the relationship between perceptions of employability and development of skills which they argue is an understudied area of research. They sampled 196 students who participated in the Erasmus programme between 2013 and 2017. Their focus 'on the individual-level approach, follows the outcome-oriented conceptualization of employability, and analyses subjective employability measures, such as perception of employability' (p. 2772). Drawing on extant literature, they define the perception of employability as individual's perception of their chances of obtaining or maintaining employment. This is further explained as an individuals' assessment of their ability (and education) to meet the demands of the labour market. They point to research that demonstrates how perceptions of employability are positively correlated with positive outcomes for individuals and organisations (see Soares & Mosquera, 2020). The authors developed four items to measure the perceptions of employability: achieving distinction from national peers, meeting the requirements of national employers, enhancing the possibility of an international career and developing career-oriented skills (p. 2774). However, their measurement of perceptions of employability is grounded within the skills/outcomes approach that focuses on individual achievement in the labour market. This paper makes a novel contribution in that it examines an institutional process approach to employability (Harvey, 2001), focussing on international students.

The process approach focuses on the connections between employability and EDOs that students can access at the institution. This approach makes important the second main conclusion reached by Huang and Turner (2018) in relation to their investigation around Chinese students' perceptions of the university support to develop future employability. Around half (ranging from 49% to 50%) of the surveyed students demonstrated awareness of the EDOs (work-based learning, employability training workshops, specific modules related to employability, societies and clubs and extra curriculum awards). Contrarily, the students rated the perceived usefulness of these activities relatively low. This finding is consistent with other research that have identified careers support as an area international student are dissatisfied with during their study in the UK (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Archer, 2016), and from an analysis of 150,000 responses to the International Student Barometer (ISB) survey across 200 HEIs (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). However, Huang and Turner (2018) suggested that the low perception of the usefulness of the EDOs 'could reflect Chinese international students' lack of the cultural understanding to recognise the relevance of such opportunities to their future development' (p. 183). A critical appraisal of Huang and Turner's (2018) explanation of the reason underpinning Chinese students perceived low perception of EDOs available in their UK institution describes a cultural deficit model (Haigh, 2014). This deficit perspective has been

criticised by several scholars as it is seen to misrepresent the learning and cultural background of international students as deficit in relation to the 'norms' in the host country (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2018) thus marginalising their agency. To this end, the discussion below sets the theoretical framework adopted in the research reported in this paper, in line with recent scholarly work on international student agency in internationalisation.

1.3 | Theoretical framework

Drawing on Archer's notion of downward conflation (attributing causality to culture), Matthews (2018) argued that the theoretical frameworks used to explain international student experiences (for example, culture shock, acculturation models or cultural learning), share a common 'tendency to use culture to explain behaviour, denying agency', and leaves changes in student engagement 'poorly explained' (p. 332). In contrast, several scholars have observed that the theoretical notion of 'agency' is well suited to explore the international student experience (Marginson, 2014; Matthews, 2018; Tran & Vu, 2018). This paper adopts the description of agency as the capacity of an individual to act with 'intentionality' in line with 'rational' choices and in response to a given circumstance; therefore, it 'is the condition of activity rather than passivity' (Hewson, 2010, cited in Tran & Vu, 2018, p. 170), which encompasses how agency is intertwined with structure (Matthews, 2018). The rationality embedded in international student agency, sees them as reflective individuals who are able to pursue or refrain from a course of action based on prevailing circumstances (Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020). In the context of my research, the agency theory underpins how (1) international students can intentionally and actively engage in employability-related activities available within the higher education structure; and (2) how they reappraise plans when faced with constraints in the host environment.

2 | THE STUDY

This paper draws on findings of a larger study of international students' rationales for studying abroad (see -Fakunle, 2020) and their perceptions on developing their employability during a 1-year masters programme in the United Kingdom. The international students recruited for the study are from 11 non-EU countries (see Table 1) who have limited access to work opportunities (20 hr per week during term time) as a condition of their student visa. The research questions examined in this paper are: (1) To what extent do international students' expectations of developing their employability match their experience? (2) Whether international students' perceptions of the benefits of studying on the Masters-level programme change over the course of the 1-year of study? This paper focuses on aspects of their experience that relates to employability which is declared as a mission for higher education within prevailing dominant policy and university practices. As such, the institutional employability-related documents available on the university website provided the definition, scope and interpretation of employability at the institution. The documents are 'recipient designed' products of the organisational structure (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011, p. 89) with students as the intended recipients. The employability documents thus informed the framing of some of the interview questions to gather insight into participants perspectives on employability as defined by the institution. A purposively selected sample of participants (Maxwell, 2013) was used to relate their perceptions of developing their employability, and possible constraints in relation to the EDOs.

Approval for the study was obtained through the Ethics Board at the university study site. Access to the participants was sought through Programme Directors (PDs) as gatekeepers who distributed the research invitation. The 19 participants were recruited from four Programmes in four Schools (Education, Business, Social and Political Science and Literatures, Languages and Cultures) in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. The individual Programmes are not identified, and pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity. The participants were

TABLE 1 Work activities engaged in by students during their 1-year Masters

School	Name	Part-time work	Internship	Volunteering
LLC	Mariana (Columbia)	✓	x	✓
	Patricia (Mexico)	x	x	✓
	Abby (USA)	x	✓	✓
	Shi (Taiwan)	x	x	✓
SPS	Alim (Turkey)	x	x	x
	Jackie (USA)	✓	x	x
	Qian (China)	x	x	x
	Bola (Nigeria)	✓	x	✓
	Mandy (South Africa)	x	x	x
	Adele (Canada)	x	x	x
EDU	Fang (China)	x	x	✓
	Chao (China)	x	x	✓
	Sofia (Colombia)	✓	x	x
	Indira (India)	✓	x	✓
BUS	Bond (Singapore)	x	x	x
	Yin (Taiwan)	x	x	✓
	Jun (China)	x	x	x
	Lan (China)	x	x	✓
	Harshad (India)	x	x	✓

Note: ✓denotes yes; x denotes no.

Abbreviations: BUS, Business; EDU, Education; LLC, Literatures, Languages and Cultures; SPS, Social and Political Science.

interviewed twice at the end of the first and second semesters. A total 36 interviews were undertaken. The semi-structured interview questions did not contain any references to the term 'employability' to ensure the interviewees were not constrained to think about their experience from a single perspective or a dominant standpoint enumerated in much of extant literature.

The research makes apparent the construct of student agency according to individual personal judgement and ability to voice how they acted on their values and objectives (Sen, 2000). Considering the sample size, this paper does not claim the responses can be generalised to all international students. The aim, as with much qualitative research, is authentic understanding and accurate representation (Silverman, 1993) of a valid account of experiential narratives from the participants (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). Open-ended interview questions allowed exploration of nuances that emerged from the students' accounts in relation to what they did and the activities they engaged with.

The interview transcripts were read repetitively to ensure familiarity and closeness to the data. Thematic analysis was used to search and refine the themes that are relevant to answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of decoding (deciphering the core meaning of interview data) and encoding (labelling and linking the data) ensured that consistencies and variations are analysed within and across the dataset (all interviews) (Saldaña, 2013). Using NVivo allowed for organising, coding and categorising different layers of interpretation of the relationships and contrasts within a source (one interviewee) and emerging dimensions in concepts presented in the dataset. The reliability and trustworthiness of the coding process was validated through member checking. Four anonymised and coded transcripts were sent to three qualitative researchers at the university to check whether the codes captured a valid representation of the data.

Consistent with Saldaña (2013), coding captured the essence of the research story presented in the interviews and these were subsequently developed into categories that form the basis of the discussion in the next section. Congruent with the theoretical positioning adopted in the research, direct quotes are used to convey key points made by the participants to highlight their agency within the affordances and constraints in the host environment.

3 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Online employability-related documents are detailed on the university website. The 'recipient designed' documents (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011, p. 89) are presented as a guide for students towards developing their employability during their study. The university employability document states that (1) students should identify gaps in their skillset and work towards developing employability-related attributes, (2) get involved in extra-curricular activities, including work experience, clubs and societies and (3) engage with the Careers Service to find the information and advice they need to prepare for future work or further study. All three components focus on individual responsibility towards developing employability. The document also points to the availability of resources within the university (e.g., Careers Service) to support employability development opportunities (EDOs). However, there remains the question asked earlier in this paper with regards to the gap around how students engage with EDOs during their study. This paper addresses this gap. Furthermore, the generic approach to employability development, which is not unique to the study site, fails to highlight possible structural encumbrances, such as, visa restrictions that limits access to work experience (discussed later) for international students.

Study findings positions international students as active agents who demonstrated awareness and took steps towards developing employability. This is conceptualised below as students' reflection--action--consultation on developing employability.

3.1 | International students' reflection with a view towards developing employability

The timing of the interviews at the end of the first and second semesters gave the participants an opportunity to talk about broadening the scope of their experience and thinking about possibilities for their future careers. Grounded in Dewey's ideas on reflective thinking, Ryan's (2013) posits that reflection consists of two main elements: (1) making sense of experience from a personal perspective, in relation to others, and contextual conditions and (2) reimagining and planning future experiences for personal and social benefit. These two aspects of reflection were apparent in discussions throughout the interviews, especially in relation to work experience during their Masters. The students' reflective thinking in relation to employability was apparent from how they described their journey before embarking on the Masters (Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020). For example, Patricia spent 1-year researching study abroad options in different countries before selecting her programme out of offers from four universities in the United Kingdom. She explained, 'Well, it's a lot of money to go into and I wanted this for so long that I didn't want to get it wrong. I did my research'. Other participants gave personal and sometimes intimate details underpinning their decision to study abroad. A snapshot of Sofia's reflections provides an example:

Unfortunately, in Colombia education depends a lot on reputation and if the university you went to does not have a good reputation in terms of quality then it doesn't matter if you are the best student. Probably the job will go to someone that comes from a highly recognised university. So, I started looking abroad to study in a place in a university that will be recognised by future employers.

Since having started her studies, Sofia talked about how she has been thinking about work opportunities as she reimagines her future post-study abroad:

I think international experience is not only studying but working would be an interesting way to keep on building towards what I want. I've been thinking that getting a job abroad somewhere around the world can actually be a good opportunity using the fact that I am studying abroad as a platform to get somewhere else.

At the early part of the programme (first semester), all the participants demonstrated a clear understanding of contextual factors that echoed Tomlinson (2008) that 'the degree is not enough' for graduate work and employability. Sofia said:

The masters can be the greatest masters ever. I can have the greatest education experience. But the only thing that would ensure that I have a job afterwards is my own work. It is ensuring that I search for a job, applying and getting my CV done. The university is not giving me a job once I graduate. I have started searching for different positions and jobs to see what my chances are. I am just kind of scanning and screening now.

Across the interviews and as shown in the brief extract from Sofia, personal and contextual factors underpinned the journey to study abroad to enhance career prospects. Not all the students were actively looking for a job at the time the first interviews were conducted. Some students, like Shi did not work part-time because of the demands of study as an international student.

At first, I was thinking of maybe I can get a part-time job because with tier 4 visa you can work for 20 hr [per week], but I didn't do that. We have 5 to 6 articles to read each week and because my first language is not English it takes me twice as much time than other people. So, I have to spend more time on studying so I have to give up the thoughts of a part-time job.

Importantly, Shi had thought about working. Her reflections had made her decide to focus on her study which directly intersects her educational (obtain the degree) and economic (enhanced career prospects) rationales to study abroad (Fakunle, 2020). Students across the different programmes talked about being interested in part-time work after finishing the taught aspect of their Masters (in April). This aspect of the student interest was explored further during the second interview. It was expected that at that stage the students would have been exposed to and probably engaged in other activities. Specifically, the participants were asked to discuss all the extra-curricular activities they had participated in (or if they were still planning to do so) and their reasons for engaging in such activities. This was expected to reveal whether they had engaged in activities with a view to develop their employability.

3.2 | Taking action towards developing employability

This section discusses the international student engagement in employability-related opportunities within and outside the university. This analysis draws on participants' responses to questions about their engagement in any or all of the activities listed the university document (work experience, clubs and societies, internships and volunteering) towards developing their employability.

3.2.1 | Work experience within the university

At the university, work-integrated learning (WIL) is embedded as either a compulsory or optional element of some programmes. However, as shown in Figure 1, WIL was not evenly integrated across all programmes. Accordingly, student engagement in WIL depended on availability.

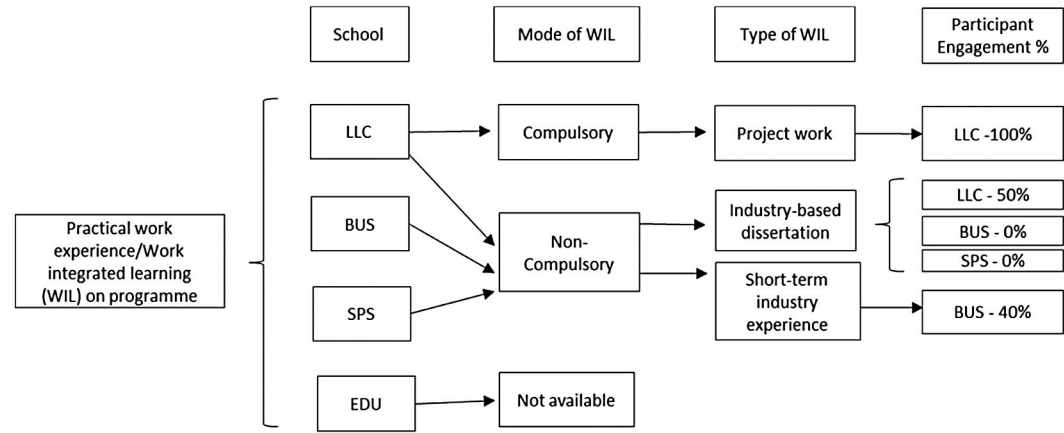


FIGURE 1 Student engagement with WIL

Consistent with Gribble et al. (2015), the importance of work experience towards developing employability was emphasised by all the participants. Mandy's case is briefly highlighted here. Mandy was offered a full scholarship to study another MSc programme in another country. Such was the 'pull' of the practical aspect of the MSc (SPS) that she decided to enrol on the current programme because of what she describes as her fear of being 'unemployable':

I wanted something [MSc programme] that was like practical, like tangible. I wanted something interesting but more employable. I was really scared that if I went to (names a different university) I will end up in an unemployable situation when I finished.

Mandy could be described as an outlier in that all the other participants mentioned financial considerations as a key rationale for selecting their MSc programme. During the interview, Mandy expressed deep regret for not taking up the scholarship. Due to financial difficulties she had moved out of student accommodation to live with a family friend. Mandy is one of two students who did not participate in the second interview. Both her and the other student (Adele) were unable to undertake the work-based dissertation that had drawn them to the programme (SPS). Adele had said that she would return to her job back home in Canada after the taught part of her Masters, if unable to do a work-based dissertation. Adele' reflection seem to underpin a course of action to return home. Both students did not reply to repeated emails to take part in the second interview and it was not possible to conclusively determine why.

The LLC students who had WIL integrated into their course talked enthusiastically about the added benefit in relation to developing their employability. Abby said:

I can say conclusively that my current study experience has made my career aspirations seem entirely possible, whereas before this year they were mostly a dream. Working in (names field of study) has always been difficult because there is no singular track to get there. As such, I often wondered how people got their foot in the door. The strength of the (MSc programme) is its applied practice component, which gives students the ability to work in real-world situations and learn from industry partners.

In contrast, the lack of opportunity to participate in a WIL was a source of dissatisfaction for students across all the three programmes (SPS, EDU and BUS) where this was not offered as a compulsory part of the MSc. This finding points to the affordances within the institution, as student actions were mediated by contextual factors. Hence, Students may demonstrate reflection and take action, but structural factors may constrain or enable agency towards

developing employability. This echoes the point made by Tran and Vu (2018) that 'whether agency succeeds or fails depends on not only students' individual efforts, but it is also contingent on the availability of resources, institutional and structural factors influencing the students' lived realities. (p. 171).

3.2.2 | Work experience outside the university

As previously stated, non-EU students can normally work for 20 hr during term time. The participants were, therefore, asked if they had engaged in the work experience listed in Table 1.

The majority (14 out of 19) of the students interviewed did not engage in part-time work (Table 1). None of the BUS participant engaged in part-time work. One LLC student did an internship. Participants across the four schools did volunteering ($n = 11$). The students valued the opportunities to engage in work experience, for three main reasons: first, for skills development as preparation prior to getting a job; second, as a signal to prospective employers by including their experience on their CV; and third, to develop networks they could draw on during and after their Masters. Abby (USA), the only student who did an internship, echoed comments made by other students about the lack of opportunity to get an internship in the UK. Bearing in mind the value the students placed on internships, it is perhaps not surprising that Indira said:

If given an opportunity I'll like to tell them [the school] that please, have some kind of internship in place for the students. Because Masters programme is something that the internship could add value. The benefit is that you get to work in an environment, and you can relate it to what you are studying. It gives you a more rounded effect.

The need for students to have a rounded educational experience involving both academic and extra-curricular activities aligns with the student perceptions and normative discourses around developing employability. However, it is unclear to what extent EDOs are explicitly embedded in the processes in place within the university. This presents a structural issue that marred the students' access to EDOs. The suggestion that institutions conduct an 'employability audit' (Harvey, 2001) seems pertinent here. Harvey suggests that employability audit is a practical way to assess the extent of EDOs, including work-experience opportunities, made available to students within an institution. He further clarifies that:

An employability audit should not be a simplistic output measure that assesses the effectiveness of what institutions provide or a supposition that students' development of employability attributes is solely dependent on what the institution provides. Rather, an employability audit provides an indication of process and an indication of where and how that process can be improved. (Harvey, 2001, p. 106)

Harvey used the example of an employability audit conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to highlight substantive issues around institutional policy and strategy as well as methodological issues (see Harvey, 2001). The HEFCW example is helpful for assessing EDOs in a general sense. However, international students are non-citizens with limited access to work opportunities in the host country. This brings up additional issues that require consideration towards the development of a holistic and equitable policy on employability in international higher education. The quotes below from Mariana and Yin provides the context of some of such systemic structural issues that need to be addressed. Mariana talked about her student visa being a barrier in doing an internship directly related to her MSc course:

I applied for an internship at (names an events organisation related to MSc field) but they said no because of my visa. Because they needed someone who could work more than 20 hr a week. My

other friend also applied for one. They didn't even check our application. They said, 'you have a student visa, no'.

The participants across the other programmes echoed Mariana's points. The limitation on their ability to secure an internship extended beyond the UK. Yin talked about how her application to do a Summer internship in another EU country was rejected because she is a non-EU student. Yin further linked her inability to secure work experience to Brexit:

Most of the [internship] opportunities were in Britain or in European countries. But it's hard for me to work in Britain. Obviously, they don't like foreigners. That is why they vote to leave [Brexit]... I asked my German friends and there is no visa problem for them to work in the UK. But for me it's really really hard. I just have to look for jobs in Taiwan.

Yin highlights the need for equitable policies for higher education students studying in a global world. This remains a policy gap in international higher education. The participants also considered how volunteering could help them to develop employability. They looked for volunteering opportunities that they felt would add value to their study experience. As Harshad explained, the main aim was to show potential employers:

that I have variety of experience in addition to my academic experience. Organisations can see that I have a good profile and they can say ok let's invite him to the next stage.

Six participants talked at length about the benefits of engaging in societal activities. Chao's reasons for engaging in a society is outlined below:

In the short period of the one-year Masters it is very difficult for me to meet the local people. I joined the Choir to immerse myself in this environment. This helps me to communicate with local people and will prepare me for my future job. This is the most important difference between being here and online study and just reading journal papers.

Chao considers an immersive experience in the host environment will enhance his intercultural communication skill towards enhancing his employability in a globalised world. His comments above, therefore, capture one of the key benefits associated with the experiential aspect of study abroad towards developing employability-related skills, for example, intercultural communication and interpersonal skills. This reflects normative discourses in the literature that study abroad enhances employability in the global sphere as 'international experience in the form of work, study, service, or volunteering are highly desired forms of off-campus learning for developing skills and competencies valued by employers' (Matherly & Tillman, 2019, p. 11). Chao's quote is especially important in view of COVID-19 and ongoing discourses about online learning and international student mobility. The discourses have been focused on instrumental aspect of internationalisation involving international student recruitment and economic rationales. This makes pertinent, Fakunles' (2020) suggestion for a broader understanding of the intersection of international students' educational, experiential, aspirational and economic rationales for study abroad in internationalisation policy development.

3.3 | Consulting within the university towards developing employability

The participants were asked to share their experience of consulting anyone or department with regards to developing employability. The students consulted staff at their Schools and the university Careers Service. The

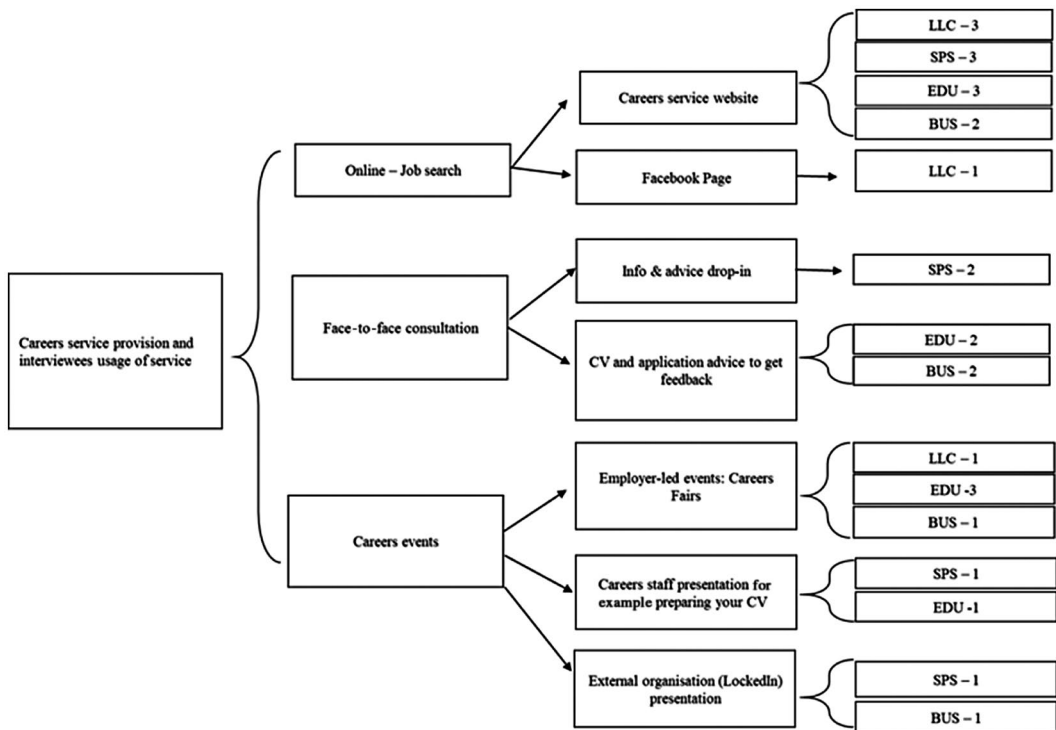


FIGURE 2 Participants engagement with the careers service

pattern of engagement varied across the participants in the four schools. Figure 2 focuses on student consultation with the Careers Service as they are the central department with a remit for developing student employability. Due to the size of the study, the pattern of student consultation with the Careers Service is not presented as representative.

The participants mostly engaged with online searches of the Career Service website for job opportunities. This illustrates how reflection, action and consultation are interconnected. For example, Sofia talked about thinking about job options while ‘scanning and screening’ the Careers Service website. However, except for one student (Mariana) who found a part-time waitressing job, none of the students obtained a job based on their search. Harshad concluded that:

I use the website to look for job opportunities and internship opportunities. Although I don't get it but still I keep exploring. If the organisations are not giving me a visa the careers service cannot do anything. The best thing they can do is that I can get my CV reviewed.

However, with regards to their CV, Qian raises the point about the mismatch between the support from the Careers Service and finding a job in her home country:

I am not using the university [careers service] because it's English [language]. I will apply for a Chinese job so not really helpful actually. I think it will be helpful if I want to get a job here. I will seek for professional help online. They can polish my CV.

None of the LLC students had engaged face to face with the university Careers Service. Incidentally, this was the only school where WIL was a compulsory part of the programme. All the LLC students talked enthusiastically about

the open-door policy operated by their Programme Director (PD). This approach allowed the students to consult their PD on all aspects of their academic study and career aspirations. This could explain less engagement with the central Careers Service. In contrast, almost all the EDU students consulted the Careers Service via different means; online, face-to-face advice and careers events (Figure 2). The EDU students were the only category of participants who stated that they were unaware of career support in their School. It is possible that unlike the larger EDU programme, the smaller LLC programme made it more manageable for the PDs to provide a more 'intimate' level of support for the students. As shown in Figure 2, a few participants from BUS and SPS consulted the Careers Service. The BUS participants also consulted the Student Development Team (SDT) that provided career support to students in the school.

International students consulted a range of careers events (fairs and careers presentation) towards developing their employability. They however expressed their disappointment that the Careers Fairs were mainly designed for home students and not international students. As has been noted in previous research (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012), Adele expressed her disappointment with the undifferentiated careers support for international students. Nevertheless, when asked about his future plans, Harshad expressed hope:

I hope that my global experience will matter to the organisations. In the future I want to see myself working at a global organisation at a good post. I hope that the skills and the exposure from here will certainly put me on the path to achieve that goal and this experience will accordingly matter a lot in the long run.

Harshad's hopeful notes remind us that linking study abroad in a causal way to subsequent employment outcomes is challenging (Di Pietro, 2019). The points in this section resonate with findings from large-scale surveys that identified careers support towards developing employability as the main area international students are concerned with during their study abroad. As a result, there are calls that universities need to find ways to support international students' career development and employability (Archer, 2016; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). By examining the processes and affordances at the institutional level, this paper highlights a policy void with regards to making connections between international students experience and employability. This in turn limits the international students' agency and impacts their perceptions on accessing EDOs.

4 | CONCLUSION

This paper adopts an expanded focus in relation to international students' agency as being capable to actively and intentionally seek to achieve their employability goals (Marginson, 2014; Matthews, 2018; Tran & Vu, 2018). The paper highlights how the lived experience of international students studying on a 1-year masters-level programme illustrates the students' reflection, action and consultation during their study towards developing their employability. International students' reflection on developing employability started before starting their studies and extended throughout the course of their study abroad. This is evident in their actions through engagement in work experience in the form WIL, part-time work, internship, volunteering and extracurricular activities, including joining societies in the host country. However, depending on affordances within the institution (across four Schools), international student consultation on EDOs ranged from solely within the School (LLC), mainly with central Careers Service (EDU) or at both the school level and centrally (BUS and SPS). An employability audit (Harvey, 2001), therefore, would be useful to assess the gaps in EDO provision across an institution. That is, however, one of the issues identified in this paper. Another pertinent issue relates to how international student agency enacted by their reflection, action and consultation on employability, raise key concerns currently not reflected in employability-related policy and practices. Employability policy at institutional and national levels are yet to address specific concerns related to visa limitations that restricts students' access to work experience opportunities outside the university, notably internships. Understandably, institutions do not form visa policy. The policy void in

this area of internationalisation is, however, directly contradictory to equity values espoused in higher education (OECD, 2018).

Given the issues mentioned above, it was important to international students to have WIL embedded on the programme. However, WIL was not evenly integrated across the university. This was seen by international students as limiting their opportunity for skill development through work experience to enhance their employability. Echoing finding in previous studies, support offered by the Careers Service was also undifferentiated to reflect the diversity amongst campus students. Considering that HEIs actively seek to recruit international students from a global pool (OECD, 2018), it should be of interest to HEIs whether international students have access to employability-related opportunities. There is a need for future research to broaden the scope covered in the study reported in this paper. For example, a larger study involving more than one institution could critically examine the role of Careers Service in facilitating EDOs for international students.

In conclusion, it is important to highlight the disruption caused by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic on higher education. Practical concerns around mobility has seen many universities moving to online or hybrid delivery. This creates possibilities for internationalised online learning and teaching (Fakunle et al., 2020), towards developing internationalised curriculum and facilitating intercultural experiences that could enhance employability in future digital work scenarios. Bridgstock (2017), however, argues that employability discourse over-emphasise labour-market skill needs, but under-acknowledge the massive disruptions to both education and the world of work being brought about by digital technologies. She contends that there is a need to 'foster students' productive participation in the uncertain economy and society of future years and decades' (p. 341)—this remains an area that warrants research. The impact of COVID-19 on mobility is yet unfolding. A decline in international student mobility will have economic ramifications for higher education institutions in top receiving countries, such as the UK. This suggests that international student employability during and post-Covid-19 will merit investigation, as a matter of priority. This could address the policy disconnect between internationalisation, employability and international student experience. In addition, future research will need to explore if EDOs can and will be integrated into students' virtual learning experience.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest is reported by the author.

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